United Nations A/AC.198/2001/7

General Assembly

Distr.: General
15 March 2001

Original: English

Committee on Information
Twenty-third session
30 April-11 May 2001

Progress report on the implementation of the pilot project on the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In resolution 55/136 B of 8 December 2001, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Committee on Information at its twenty-third session a progress report on the results of the implementation of the pilot project for the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations, and declared its intention to examine before the end of 2001 the final report on the results of the project with a view to taking a decision on the matter during its fifty-sixth session.

2. Furthermore, the General Assembly urged the Secretary-General to maintain and strengthen the managerial capacity, staff resources, programme output and means of delivery of United Nations Radio in the six official languages and, if feasible, in other languages, in order to ensure the success of the radio pilot project and, to that end, enhance coordination with the United Nations News Centre and the United Nations information centres, as well as cooperation with national and international radio organizations in Member States.

3. In his report to the Committee on Information at its twenty-second session (A/AC.198/2000/6), the Secretary-General stated that the development and implementation of the pilot project was one of the key components in the Department of Public Information's overall drive to more effectively disseminate United Nations news directly to the media worldwide.

4. The present report provides details on the implementation of the pilot project, including a brief overview of the preparations and the mechanics of launching the project. It also provides a summary of cooperative partnerships that have been established with radio stations and networks for the broadcasting of daily news from the United Nations.

II. Launch of the pilot project

5. The Department of Public Information of the Secretariat launched the radio pilot project on 28 August 2000, targeting audiences in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and the Caribbean. Measures with regard to staffing, training and transmission facilities were in place to facilitate a launch just before the Millennium Summit, held at Headquarters from 6 to 8 September 2000. Staff were also trained prior to the launch. Arrangements were made with several communications service distributors to provide short-wave transmissions to Africa and the Middle East in three languages: Arabic, English and French. These

01-28208 (E) 160301

far-reaching short-wave transmissions have been tracked, and transmission reports have been received from individual listeners in different regions of the world. Satellite distribution arrangements were made with the service providers to transmit the programming to partner stations in the Caribbean region that, during an earlier survey, had expressed interest in receiving and broadcasting the programme. Other arrangements were being sought with Government information services in the region to ensure wider distribution and broadcasting of the daily programme through national radio stations.

6. In addition to the arrangements made with short-wave and satellite distributors, the Department has ensured the establishment of an effective and multi-pronged system of delivery, since distribution and reception needs vary from one region to another. Other options for broadcasters include analogue telephone feeds, digital telephone systems (ISDN) lines and electronic file transfer (FTP).

7. The launch of the live programme was preceded by a review and streamlining of taped programming. Several taped programmes were eliminated or consolidated. Since the launch, the number of cassette tapes distributed by the Department has been reduced by 25 per cent. The overall target is to reduce the distribution of taped programmes by 50 per cent before the beginning of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly. As a result, cost-efficiencies are being realized and a more timely, up-to-the-minute news product is being delivered worldwide through the use of various methods.

8. Staffing levels among regional units have improved, and a near-parity level in all official languages has been achieved.

III. Format and content

9. A key component in the shift to daily programming was the development of a programme format of interest to broadcasters: a 15-minute daily (Monday-Friday) package in the six official languages of the Organization. While focusing primarily on news developments from the entire United Nations system, the programme also includes interviews, background reports, features, updates from peacekeeping missions and coverage of activities of United Nations agencies around the world relating to development. More than 50 per cent of the content is, in fact, gathered from activities in the field.

10. As the launch of the live programme coincided with the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, pilot project began by providing extensive coverage of this historic event, including exclusive interviews, background reports and features. In addition to the 15-minute live broadcasts in the six official languages, statements by Heads of State or Government, special reports, interviews, summaries of the debate and other activities were transmitted to partner stations, and national and international networks. During the three-day event, over 300 radio transmissions were fed to 140 radio broadcasters in 77 countries. The Millennium Summit also provided an opportunity for the 15-minute programme of United Nations Radio to carry wide-ranging coverage of the statements made and the interviews that were carried out with the dignitaries. A total of 105 broadcasts in the six official languages and in Portuguese were transmitted for live broadcast by 61 radio stations in 42 countries, and a total of 12 Heads of State were interviewed on the programme.

11. The dissemination of information on the Millennium Summit by United Nations Radio serves as an example of the breadth of coverage of a special event. Whenever there are special events at the United Nations, United Nations Radio has the ability to provide direct and multilingual transmissions of statements and excerpts to every region of the world. In the coming months, United Nations Radio will provide special coverage of all the upcoming conferences, special sessions of the General Assembly and other high-profile events planned for the current year.

12. The live radio programmes continue to report daily on events throughout the world from the perspective of the United Nations, often providing a view not heard on other media. More than half of this content comes from activities undertaken away from Headquarters. Among recent reports, an interview with a senior Russian military officer serving with the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone was later picked up as an important international news story by the Russian media. Similarly, the coverage of the refugee situation in Guinea and Afghanistan gave key United Nations officials and experts on the scene immediate news exposure through interviews with United Nations Radio. First-hand radio reports from the first border crossing by United Nations peacekeepers through Eritrean and Ethiopian frontlines

were also prominently featured by the media. The programme also provided a public service mechanism, spreading information on the prevention of the highly contagious Ebola virus through interviews with United Nations experts on this issue. United Nations Radio was thus linking an educational message with news of the virus's latest outbreak.

13. Particularly noteworthy also was a round-table discussion with the most senior officials from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, Rwanda and Burundi, who were present for the Security Council meeting on the Great Lakes crisis in February 2001. The 40-minute meeting was the first time these senior officials had sat across a table in this manner. The discussion was taken live by ten African radio stations, which is the maximum number our current technology can accommodate. The discussion was transmitted to a number of other stations later. For added impact, the transcript of the discussion was immediately placed on the NewsCentre on the United Nations web site.

14. The timely nature of the programming has also enabled partner stations worldwide to track the progress of United Nations relief efforts in the aftermath of natural disasters, such as during the recent floods in Viet Nam and the earthquake in India. The Secretary-General's reaction to breaking news is featured on a regular basis. United Nations Radio has also been able to cover issues of priority to Member States, such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the protection of children in armed conflict, the advancement of women, as well as the other core issues of concern to the United Nations.

IV. Building partnerships

15. The pilot programme is received by listeners worldwide through a range of transmission vehicles. In addition to the arrangements made with satellite communications providers and short-wave transmitters, the Department's International Broadcasting Centre is used for telephone transmissions. The Internet is also used to transmit the signal via FTP, in addition to transmissions via electronic mail and daily postings to the United Nations web site. The range of transmission vehicles is part of the effort to provide audiences and partner networks worldwide with options for reception of the programme suited to the needs of each specific market.

16. Partnerships with local, regional and national broadcasters worldwide are an important component of the project. Prior to the launch, the Department made extensive use of surveys to determine the level of the broadcasters' interest in the proposed programme and their ability to receive and transmit the programming directly, utilizing dedicated time slots for rebroadcasting. A summary of the progress made in establishing these partnerships is elaborated in the following paragraphs and classified in accordance with regions and languages of transmission.

17. The Spanish language live programme is transmitted directly to over 40 partner stations in Central and South America, the Caribbean and the United States of America. All methods of distribution are utilized, including telephone dial-up via the International Broadcasting Centre and electronic file transfer. The partner stations include both local and national broadcasters. In addition, the programme is carried by the radio service of the Organization of American States to broadcasters in the region, and by local broadcasters in the New York metropolitan area.

18. The live programming in Arabic is distributed from the International Broadcasting Centre at Headquarters and carried by 15 partner stations in the Middle East and North Africa, including Radio Cairo, Radio Algeria, Radio Bahrain, Radio and Television of Morocco, the Voice of Palestine, as well as national radio stations in Abu Dhabi, Somalia, Tunisia and Yemen. In addition, the Department has arranged with a communications provider to broadcast the live programming in Arabic via short wave. Two short-wave frequencies are used to transmit the programming five days a week at 18:30 GMT to Africa and the Middle East. Negotiations are near conclusion with the satellite communications organization ArabSat, the leading provider of satellite distribution in the Arab world, to distribute the Arabic radio programming to all stations and networks broadcasting in Arabic from the region to western Europe.

19. The Chinese language live programming, transmitted by electronic file transfer, is received and rebroadcast by China National Radio and China Radio International, reaching an audience of hundreds of millions. Utilizing telephone and electronic file transfer, two partner stations in the United States of America also rebroadcast the Chinese language programming to the Chinese-speaking community.

20. The live programming in French is transmitted to approximately 50 partner stations in Africa and the Caribbean. In Africa, some of the partner stations include local, national and regional broadcasters such as Africa No. 1 (Gabon), Radio Brazzaville, Radio Nationale du Sénégal, Channel Africa (South Africa), Radio Mali, Radio Cameroun, Radio Rwanda, la Voix du Sahel and the national radio of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the Caribbean, the programme is received and rebroadcast by Radio Haiti and Radio Havana International. The programme is also rebroadcast by Canal EF that reaches listeners in Africa, Canada and France. In addition, an arrangement exists with another international communications network to transmit the programming via three short-wave frequencies to francophone Africa and the Middle East.

21. The target area for the live programme in Russian is the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States. This covers a wide geographical area extending from northern Europe to Central Asia. Arrangements are in place for the daily transmission of the live programme to the Voice of Russia. To account for the numerous time zones in this region, the Russian programme is broadcast on this national broadcasting network three times a day.

22. The live programming in English is broadcast in Africa, North and South America, the Caribbean and Europe. It is also transmitted via telephone and electronic file transfer to partner stations, including the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, Radio Tanzania, the Namibia Broadcasting Corporation, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, Channel Africa and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria. The Department has arranged for a regional satellite distributor to re-transmit the signal to 12 partner stations in the Caribbean, as well as in Guyana and Suriname. In addition, an arrangement has been made with a communications provider to transmit three short-wave frequencies to Africa and the Middle East.

23. The Internet has been a valuable tool for distribution and promotion of the radio pilot project. Since the launch of the programme, the Department has made resources available to offer the live programming on the United Nations web site. The programme is digitized in the six official languages in Real Media and MP3 formats, making it available for Internet streaming, downloading and distributing to partner stations minutes after the completion of the live broadcast.

24. In addition to making the programming available on the Internet, information on the pilot programming is presented on individual language web pages, featuring headlines and excerpts of the current day's programme, scheduling updates, and contact information.

25. The radio project is one of the central instruments in the overall departmental effort to take the United Nations message more effectively to the mass media of developing countries, very few of which can afford to assign correspondents to United Nations Headquarters. Indeed, almost all the radio stations taking these live news feeds are from the developing world.

V. Next steps

26. One of the most telling reactions to the launch and value of the pilot project of United Nations Radio has come from the Director-General of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria. In a letter to the Director of the United Nations Information Centre in Lagos, the Director-General stated: "It is, therefore, important that you know, as well as United Nations Headquarters, that this is to us an extremely valuable service, especially that we do not have the resources to post a correspondent to the United Nations, which would be an ideal situation for a radio service the size of Radio Nigeria. By bridging this communication gap, the United Nations has expanded its activities in Africa's largest listenership. This can only be a good thing."

27. The main thrust of the live daily broadcasting project of United Nations Radio is to continue expanding partnerships with national and private broadcasting organizations. The Department's aim, in this regard, is to foster a greater number of rebroadcasting initiatives and to tailor its production output to the needs of regional audiences and partner stations.

28. A second area of priority for the Department of Public Information is that of enhancing cooperation with the United Nations common system to generate and disseminate more information. By tapping the information reserve of the United Nations system, United Nations Radio will be able to offer a comprehensive public information service about a wide range of core United Nations issues to radio audiences

and partner stations around the world. While some modest steps have already been taken in that direction, the Department will continue to seek closer links with the specialized agencies, programmes and funds of the United Nations system, as well as with the peacekeeping missions and other field activities in gathering material for daily distribution from New York.

29. The newsworthiness of daily transmissions by United Nations Radio will be enhanced by continuing to develop the field network of contributors. More frequent access by the staff of United Nations Radio to senior officials within the United Nations system, to delegations and to staff in the field will be pursued more vigorously in order to diversify programme content and generate more timely material.

30. As part of modernization plans, new technology will continue to be introduced in order to streamline editing and networking between language sections and studios. Efforts to create an open newsroom will continue in order to ensure an effective and smooth work flow.

31. The Department of Public Information will explore the possibility of providing more feeds via satellite to partner stations to reduce reliance on conventional methods of transmission via telephone. Continued efforts will be made to deliver the programming via the Internet, using FTP and electronic mail.

32. The live daily programming of United Nations Radio is an integral part of the Department's reorientation to better serve the global 24-hour news cycle. The Secretary-General is seeking feedback from Member States on its impact so far and guidance for the future development of the daily international radio broadcasting capacity for the Organization.

33. Authorization for the pilot project will conclude this year. Neither the mandate nor the resources exist for its continuation in the biennium 2002-2003. The future of the project therefore depends on the General Assembly's assessment of it, in accordance with resolution 55/136 B, with a view to taking a decision on the matter during the fifty-sixth session.